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TOPIC 13:

CULTURE AND POLITICS IN VIETNAM

By

Dr. George A. Carver, Jr.

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TOPIC 13:  
CULTURE AND POLITICS IN VIETNAM

By  
Dr. George A. Carver, Jr.

(29 February 1968)

CAPTAIN JACKSON: (Introduced the speaker.)

DR. CARVER: Gentlemen:

I want to talk for about an hour on culture and politics in Vietnam. I decided at the last minute to amend this slightly and also talk about today's Tet offensive.

The situation in Vietnam is one of extreme complexity; that is something that is well known to all of you here. One of the reasons for the complexity is the particular political and cultural matrix within which the offensive is being waged constitute the context for the Communist struggle. Some of these factors are not unique to Vietnam; you will find them in other areas of the world.

Practically all of them you have in Vietnam are through the local medium. If they are representative of generic problems that occur elsewhere, the particular local manifestations I think are something to be appreciated if we are to understand Vietnamese culture.

I think one thing we need to understand at the outset is that much of our traditional and conceptual paraphernalia for political and social analyses is very wide and apart when applied

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to the country's actualities in Vietnam.

When we try to analyze political forces, we talk in terms of governments, in terms of states, in terms of aggression, all of which constitute words in a vocabulary that are based essentially on a Western European experience and a Western European tradition, little of which has much relevance which confronts us in Southeast Asia in general and Vietnam in particular.

To understand why this is so and to understand why the Vietnamese behave in some ways the way that they do requires a certain understanding of Vietnamese history and a certain understanding of the cultural matrix within which their political ideas are shaped and take form and meaning. We do not have time this afternoon for a complete detailed course in Vietnamese history, nor am I sure I am the one qualified to give it, but there are one or two broad themes and broad theses of background that I would like to call to your attention so we are talking from a common frame of reference.

First of all, I think you have to remember that the Vietnamese originally arose as an identifiably separate homogenetic ethnic group in the Tonkin Delta or in the cradle of the Red River Basin. This was their parent home, and this is the place where they emerged a century or two before the birth of Christ as a separate people. Since then, the ethnic Vietnamese slowly and very gradually spread southward down the coastal lowlands, staying primarily out of the highlands through what is now central Vietnam and

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into what is now South Vietnam, culminating this gradual increase and spread with their emergence in the delta portion of what is now South Vietnam, which is actually a development of the relatively mid- to late 18th century and something that was not finally completed until the early 19th century.

This almost amoebalike process of war, conquest and movement took, as I just indicated, something like 18 centuries to complete, and the fact of this gradual movement to the South and the length of time it required had certain effects which are still very much with us today. It is, for example, one of the reasons why all of the Vietnamese have a very great, highly developed sense of ethnic pride and commonly-shared ethnic heritage. They have very little sense of political or institutional loyalty or nationalism in that context as we would understand it in the West. This pride in sort of general ethnic heritage is in the political sense complemented by an intense set of local, regional loyalties which make for ties to persons of your own particular locality or region, which greatly transcend your sense of identification with or ties to people who come from other parts or other regions within the same Vietnamese family.

Also, it is important to remember and never to forget that Vietnam was originally and traditionally a rice-growing culture and that one of the features of a rice-growing culture is the very highly developed and articulated institution of the extended family or clan within which a person who grows up in that type of cultural

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background finds purpose, meaning and significance in his life. This may sound like a lot of high-flowing and perhaps doubtful historical or sociological analysis, but I can assure you it is relevant to a number of practical and immediate problems. To cite a specific example, the one to which it is the most relevant is the age-old problem of corruption, which very much bedevils us at the present time and about which much ink is shed, both in official traffic and in the daily press.

In our own society and culture we tend to think of ourselves as more or less atavistic individuals, each of whom operates in areas such as the south, where there is a strong sense of family tie or family tradition. In America and elsewhere in the West if one is thrown into a position where he has access to goods or services or a position to confer profit or preferment on others, it is considered vaguely immoral and certainly something you do not want to get caught at if you take care of your own immediate family and those who have immediate ties of kinship to you. In Vietnam this works quite the reverse because your prime obligation within the matrix of the culture in which you grew up is to take care, first and foremost, of those bound to you by ties of immediate kinship. If you do not look after them, instead of doing something that is good and noble and worthwhile within that social context, you are running very much against the grain of everything that is traditional and sanctioned in your own society. To put it in very crude terms: Whereas giving your brother-in-law a contract in the United States is considered bad, not giving it

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to your brother-in-law in Vietnam, operating within the traditional matrix and mode, is considered equally bad or perhaps even worse.

We could go on for hours, which we will not, I assure you, explaining some of these historical perspectives and background, but the point I want to make is that the Vietnamese, because of their tradition, do not have a sense of nationalism as we understand it; they have no institutional loyalty developed to institutions with traditional historical sanction as we know them, and their sense of pride in their ethnic heritage does not readily or easily translate into a sense of obligation to participate in some sort of larger political endeavor as we would understand the term. And this is very much the case for practically all Vietnamese, with one rather large and sterling exception. That large and sterling exception is those Vietnamese who are members of the Vietnamese Communist Party who have a sense of organization, a sense of discipline and a sense of structure which breaks through the family tie in a manner that no non-Communist organization has ever been able to achieve although the means through which this breakthrough is achieved involve the use of terror and calculated and systematic ruthlessness that all of us on the non-Communist side of the fence would consider unacceptable.

There is one more piece of historical background which I think you need to be aware of before we begin to take a look at how some of these patterns and cultural outlooks and activities

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really shape and move and operate in the context of the events of the current day, and that, of course, is the overriding French experience or the experience of French colonialism.

Now remember there was never in history a Vietnamese state as we know the term. There was only the briefest of intervals, and the intervals would be technically literal between 1802 and 1853, when all of what is now Vietnam was even nominally under a single political control. That was during the early years of the Nguyen Dynasty, when control over all of Vietnam was established by a gentleman who took the reign (Gia Long) in 1802 and made his writ run more or less from the China border to the tip of the Cau Mau Peninsula.

The French came in shortly thereafter. As a matter of fact, the French helped Gia Long go to his throne and progressively began detaching certain parts of Vietnamese territory from Vietnamese control. We do not have time here to go through the whole complex story of French colonial history, but suffice it to say that the French split the country into three regions--the north, the center, and the south--or, more basically, the Red River Delta, the Mekong Delta, and the coastal strip in between (or the coastal area in between). These were traditionally sanctioned regional divisions which the French batted onto, but they split the country into these three parts and very actively fostered a sense of local or regional piques, doing everything they could to undercut a political sense of Vietnamese unity. There was a lot of work done on

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Vietnamese history, Vietnamese literature, Vietnamese tradition, but the French did everything they could to sandbag any developing awareness of political unity or organizational or institutional unity which would have complicated the problems of colonial rule.

Secondly, the French did everything within their power, and their power was considerable and their success equally so, to exacerbate and exploit and encourage all the divisive tendencies in Vietnamese political life. They encouraged the foundation of various local quasi-religious sects such as the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai in the south. They encouraged regionalism. They encouraged particularism. They encouraged local loyalties, and they did everything possible in the cultural and attitudinal sphere to make it difficult for the Vietnamese to combine themselves around a single political goal, a single political idea. Furthermore, in the course of the French colonial experience the political evolution and development that did grow up in Vietnam, the bulk of the expression of this sort of ethnic national sentiment, grew up in a very conspiratorial and clandestine context. So your traditional political parties--your Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang, for example, or your Dai Viet--came into being not as political institutions or organizations as we know the term, but as clandestine, covert, revolutionary bodies whose function was to overthrow an existing structure and whose very survival depended on a kind of controlled paranoia and suspicion of all those who were not members of the immediate fold, of distrust of other people, and a sort of very conspiratorial,

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backdoor approach to all forms of political life.

This was equally true in the case of the Communists who came into being at about the same time the Vietnamese Communist Party did, as I shall elaborate more in a moment, having been founded in 1930. But the Communists had something that their other nationalist opponents did not have, and that was a set of organizational doctrines, practices and disciplines growing out of a larger context--to wit: the international experience of the Communist movement--and they also had in the person of the man who now calls himself Ho Chi Minh a rather charismatic figure who was in many ways a sheer organizational genius. He was able to impose on the Communist movement a kind of cohesion and discipline that none of his rivals were able to impose on their own followers.

It was against this broad background of cultural attitudes and political divisions and lack of political experience and lack of institutional cement and loyalty that the struggle we are now witnessing came into being. This constituted, if you would, the stage, the setting and the scene; and it was against this backdrop that the various Vietnamese actors have played their respective roles.

The roles that they have played, as I shall try to show in a few minutes, have been very heavily conditioned by this kind of backdrop in this environment out of which the principal players came.

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The struggle in which we are now engaged in Vietnam is, of course, rooted in many causes, but the principal one so far as the struggle appearing in its present manifestation is concerned is the constant and unwavering and unchanging determination of the Vietnamese Communist Party to acquire political control over all of Vietnam. This has been the fixed star in the Party's horizon, the pole star against which it has constantly navigated, if you will, ever since the Party was created in 1930.

We do not have the time nor will it necessarily serve our purpose to trace the whole history of the evolution of the Party structure in the 1930s and the way the Party always had as its main enemy, perhaps, the French, but its most immediate enemies those nationalist elements, also opposed to the French, who are not under complete Communist control. And the principal efforts of the Party during the '30s were devoted much more to subverting and undercutting and downplaying, and, if necessary, betraying to the French their nationalist non-Communist rivals. As I said, their efforts were devoted much more in this direction than to actual opposition to French rule.

Those of you who studied the history of Vietnam and who have followed the course of the Franco-Viet Minh War well know the chaotic events at the close of World War II gave the Vietnamese Communist Party its golden opportunity. You know in 1941 the Chinese Nationalists took Ho, who at that time was using the

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name of Nguyen Ai Quoc, out of a jail and attempted to get him to organize a group of Vietnamese in South China, hoping that thereby the Chinese could create a political action and intelligence-collecting vehicle that could harass the Japanese, who at that time occupied Vietnam. Most of you probably know that the upshot of this organizational activity was an institution or a body known as the Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang Minh Hoi (or League for Vietnamese Independence), better known generally by its short title of the Viet Minh.

The Communist Party under Ho swiftly took control of all the key positions in places within the Viet Minh movement and utilized the Nationalist banner to direct the struggle against the French from 1946 to 1954, whereby the French were thrown out of Indochina, and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, so-called, which was the political expression of party rule, was given uncontested and unchallenged political and administrative control over those portions of Vietnam north of the 17th Parallel.

The situation that existed in 1954 was of course the one that was the fruit of the Geneva Conference which settled that first Franco-Viet Minh struggle and which theoretically in a temporary fashion partitioned the country at the 17th Parallel, leaving the northern half under the direction of one political grouping completely dominated and controlled by the Communist Party, and the southern half under another political institutional matrix headed at that time by Ngo Dinh Diem, who at the time of Geneva was Premier and subsequently became the Chief of State of the then

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associated state of South Vietnam, which has evolved into the present GVN, or Government of Vietnam.

I am sure most of you know, but if you do not, you should remember that both of these political institutions (the one in Hanoi and the one in Saigon) claim they rightfully can run the whole country, though in point of fact, the northern one had unchallenged international support for administrative direction down to the 17th Parallel and the southern one up to the 17th Parallel.

At the time of Geneva practically all observers, and certainly those who constituted the majority of the Politburo of the Communist Party, had every reason to suspect that the acquisition of Communist control over the southern part of Vietnam had been only temporarily delayed. They had reason to suspect this on two counts: First, there was a provision in the Geneva Accords, as you well know, for a set of elections to occur in the summer of 1956 whereby the country in some vague and nondefined, not clearly spelled out, form was to be reunified. If you stop and reflect for a moment that as of that moment in time the northern part of the country had approximately 17 million to 18 million people and the southern part of the country at that time had approximately 13 million to 14 million, you will recognize that right there there was a population disparity which the Communists could easily exploit because with two years to orchestrate and administrate and organize the northern part of the country they could virtually guarantee under any kind of conceivable international supervision

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or inspection, particularly one which was based on a unanimity rule of a troika which had a Polish or Communist member, that they could deliver 99.9 percent of the vote for whatever proposition the Communist Party wanted. Thus, in any national plebiscite the deck was stacked and there was no chance for an outcome other than that dictated by Hanoi. This, of course, was very much recognized and appreciated by those in the southern government, and this is the reason why Diem refused to have any part in the electoral process and why he ignored the 1956 Geneva deadline.

In Hanoi the Politburo (or the Party) rested its hopes or its expectation of the acquisition of control not just upon the election, which would provide the final seal, but, I think, even more on their understanding and appreciation or in those days perfectly legitimate expectation that even without the election the south would collapse into anarchy and chaos such that the Communist Party, being the only organized and disciplined body, could easily move in and pick up the pieces. Very few people would have expected anything else. You had in South Vietnam a nongovernment presiding over a nonstate. You had all the problems I cited earlier. You had no sense of institutional loyalty. You had no sense of protection. You had a government with a very questionable national army, and you had a government who had within its borders bodies such as the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai with their own independent armed strength very much apart from government control and very anxious to overthrow the total structure in their own interest.

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Thus, no one in his right mind would have anticipated anything but the kind of anarchy and chaos that was in fact anticipated in Hanoi. All of you know this is not what in fact occurred. To everyone's surprise (in a way, the term "miraculous" is not inappropriate), the Diem government not only managed to survive but managed to make the first steps of concrete progress toward the creation of at least a potentially viable southern state structure that was independent of Communist control. This was the story, and this is what happened between 1954 and 1956.

This was a new situation, a new dimension which posed the Politburo in Hanoi with a new set of problems they had not anticipated and for which they were not initially prepared to cope. By 1956 it became obvious that instead of collapsing, South Vietnam was going to last and was going to exist. The relative picture presented between political and economic life north and south of the 17th Parallel was moving in a direction that was increasingly unfavorable to Hanoi and increasingly favorable to Saigon. Do not misunderstand me or do not think I am claiming or saying things that I am not claiming and not saying; no one is suggesting that life was paradise below the 17th Parallel; no one is suggesting that the Diem government even in those days was any model of perfection or Jeffersonian liberalism or politically ideal in any way, size, shape, or form. It was, however, doing something which Hanoi or the Politburo or the Communist Party would not have thought possible--that is, creating or developing the one thing

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that the Communist Party could not tolerate and could not allow. That was a viable state structure not under Communist control. This was a process the Party had to thwart, had to undo, if its lifelong ambition of the acquisition of political control of South Vietnam was ever to see fulfillment and fruition.

Faced with this new situation, the Party made a new set of decisions and undertook a new course of action. That course of action was to initiate in 1956 and in 1957 a program of terrorism and subversion leading to insurrection which was designed to exacerbate the latent tensions in the Vietnamese body politic, recreate the kind of anarchy, incipient anarchy and chaos that had existed in 1954, undo the work that was being done, and recreate an atmosphere and environment that would be conducive to the acquisition of Communist control over the country.

This terrorism and violence in their initial stages were very selective and very skillful and designed to affect those points of contact between the burgeoning state structure in Saigon and the bulk of the population--affect those points of contact in two ways: It was designed to take out those whose functions were essential to the evolution of the state and the acquisition of popular confidence in it--that is, the doctor, the health worker, the malaria eradicator, the teacher, the village official, all of whom were targets for intimidation, harassment, or in many cases, actual assassination. It was also designed to take advantage of the latent tensions in the society and the malfeasance or

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nonfeasance of certain government personnel to project the Robin Hood image, the image of the nascent Communist movement, which of course did not preach Marxist doctrine, as the protector of the people.

The other targets were the unpopular police chief, the unpopular province chief, the unpopular local official against whom the local indigenous population had legitimate reason to be resentful or have grievances.

This terrorist and subversive campaign was conducted by and large through two sets of media. The first one was the latent cellular structure that the Communist Party or the Viet Minh movement, which at the close of the Franco-Viet Minh War under complete Party control, had left behind in South Vietnam after 1954 at the time of the partition of the country. The word came out for this cellular structure to reactivate itself, begin its activities, and start anew recruiting and building.

There were a couple of other administrative steps taken at this same time, the full impact and consequences of which did not come into play until much later. The most important of these was the creation in the summer of 1956 of a body which still exists today, known as the Reunification Bureau, which was initially an arm of the Party's Central Committee and subsequently became an arm of the government, but in both cases was headed by the same person, a general named Nguyen Van Vinh, an ethnic northerner, who had risen to prominence in the southern wing of the struggle during

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the Franco-Viet Minh War and who still serves in this post today. He is also Deputy Chief of Staff of the North Vietnamese Army.

Too, Vinh's administrative control was given responsibility for direction of the 80,000- or 90,000-man pool of ethnic southerners who had fought in the Viet Minh movement who were taken north in 1954 and who constituted a body of in some cases highly trained and dedicated and in all cases malleable and trainable southern talent that could be tapped for tasks in the southern struggle in the future and were shortly so tapped and so tasked. From this pool of ethnic southerners, beginning probably as early as 1957 though initially in a small trickle, the Party selected and trained and dispatched people down to the south to aid in the development of this burgeoning insurrectionist, terrorist movement. These people were not to serve as manpower fillers, but they were to serve as the cadre, the trainers, the organizers, the directing elements thereof.

You have a very complicated situation that evolved over this time because as this terrorist and subversive movement grew on the one hand, on the other hand the Saigon government under Diem crested its own internal high watermark probably sometime early in 1957 and after that began to belie the promise and initiative and achievement of its earlier years to the point where the government increasingly fell into patterns of activity and patterns of behavior which instead of drawing people to its cause and improving on its efficiency of operation and rallying support

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for its own institutional structure, which you will remember had no traditional sanction because there was no institutional structure of any consequence prior to the Diem government's coming into power; instead of doing these things which would have increased the progress it had made, it began falling into a series of behavior patterns and activity patterns and attitudinal patterns which turned people away from it and created a body of legitimate, genuine indigenous grievances, particularly among the rural part of the population, which in those days constituted the predominant part of the population.

You had this double-action thing going on because the Party in its organizational activities did everything it could to exacerbate and make full exploitation of the shortfalls and shortcomings in performance of this central government to create new problems for it and at the same time to draw recruits to its cause by playing on the shortcomings and weaknesses of the government in general or its personnel in key rural areas in particular. Here again, of course, the Party made full use of certain other traditional aspects of Vietnamese society, especially that very localism and intensely local orientation that I spoke about a few minutes earlier. Remember that particularly the rural Vietnamese, when he thinks of government, he does not think of institutions; he does not think of constitutions; he does not think of parliaments; he thinks of the district chief or the ARVN officer in the immediate area he knows. This is the symbolic surrogate for

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government, and if he likes this fellow, he is prepared to like what he represents; if he does not, he is not. Therefore, in every area where you had local officials whose performance was less than might have been desired, the Communist Party had a ripe field for recruitment because the local attitudes toward the government in general were almost entirely framed and conditioned by local attitudes toward the government's local representative, who in many cases, was alien to the area he was administering and hence regarded as an outlander or foreigner by those people. Hence there was a tension set up by which the Party was quick to profit.

You got a development and evolution of this terrorist structure, always aimed at undoing and preventing the evolution of this non-Communist state structure and profiting from all its shortcomings and complicating the Saigon task of creating that which had never existed before--to wit: a viable non-Communist southern state.

Despite the relative degree of progress that was made, the progress was not considered by the Politburo in Hanoi to be satisfactory. Before I move on down the road let me make one thing crystal clear. It is certainly true that even in this initial organizational stage the Party apparatus took full advantage of and made maximum exploitation of genuine and legitimate local grievances and ills within the body politics, some of them of long historical origin and standing and some of them caused by or compounded by shortfalls in performance and conception on the part of the Saigon government. So it is certainly true that the organizational

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activity of the insurgency profited from genuine local problems. What is not true, however, is that the insurgency itself sprang up spontaneously and indigenously because the apparat which directed the insurgency and controlled it, which sponsored its recruitment and other activities, was from the inception and outset under the complete domination and control of the Vietnamese Communist Party with a chain of command that ran directly from the smallest village down in the delta of South Vietnam to the Party Politburo sitting in Hanoi. So had there not been a Communist Party, had there not been a deliberate policy decision on the part of the Party to mount an insurgency, you would have had a great deal of trouble in South Vietnam. You probably would have had a great deal of local disorder, some banditry and some armed expression of political discontent, perhaps, but you would never have had an insurgency per se and certainly none that would have ever developed to anything like the sort of problem with which we are now faced.

Going to the very root, the insurgency batted on legitimate local grievances, but the insurgency from its outset was the fruit of a controlled and deliberate policy decision made by the Politburo in Hanoi.

In 1958 the Politburo was forced to take stock, probably as the result of an inspection trip made to South Vietnam by the now Secretary-General of the Party, a gentleman named Le Duan, who was himself a southerner and who rose to prominence by running the

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southern wing of the movement during the Franco-Viet Minh War. The decision was taken at that time that despite the progress being made in the terrorist and subversive movement, the progress was not adequate and something more was required, and that something more was a movement out of this first stage of struggle into the actual stage of armed insurrection. This decision was probably taken in late 1958, certainly by early 1959, and swiftly manifested itself on the ground in two ways.

One, there began to be a quantum jump in the scale and intensity of VC military activity. Whereas heretofore you had platoon-sized actions, you began to have company-sized actions and even battalion-sized actions. There was a rapid rise in recruitment, and there was a rapid rise in the structuring of local forces. There was also a marked increase, though we did not fully appreciate this at the time, in the stream of infiltration from the north back to the south, although again in this period that I am now talking about (1957-1959), and particularly the 1958 to 1960 period, the infiltration was relatively small in numbers but absolutely critical in terms of quality and performance. It was made up almost exclusively of ethnic southerners, but it was the ethnic southerners who were sent back during this period who built the movement and who constituted and created the core around which both the Viet Cong political apparatus came to be as it now exists and the Viet Cong local and main force apparatus as it now exists, without which neither this political nor military apparatus could have been developed or could have been created.

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What were sent south were not ground-pounders, were not fillers; they were the squad leaders in some cases, the company commanders in almost all cases, the company G-2s, the artillery specialists, the future district committee chairmen, the future true proselytizing subcommittee chairmen, the future front affairs committee chairmen, the key nexus of organizational and administrative talent which built up the insurgency and which have constantly kept it under Party discipline and under Party control.

This move into a heightened stage of struggle came at a time when the pot was rapidly boiling on the non-Communist side-- again for these cultural and political reasons that we have outlined. The tension under Diem began to become more and more manifest until finally in 1963 the tensions under the surface burst through the surface. What happened then was that Diem and his government, almost systematically in a way that is strongly reminiscent of a Greek tragedy, progressively alienated each segment of the society without whose support no government could be expected to function. This was very much a culturally conditioned style of operation on the part of the Diem government because despite his position as an elected chief of state, Diem had a very mandarinal concept, a very traditionalist concept, of politics, a concept which construed the chief of state as had been the emperor before him as an extension of the father figure within one's own family. In Diem's concept of politics political support, political respect, political loyalty (if you will) was not something that one had to go out and solicit

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and earn, develop, and generate any more than love, loyalty, obedience, discipline, and respect were something a father had to go out and earn and generate from his own children. This style and concept of politics coupled with certain other personnel and personal problems, coupled with the increasingly malevolent influence of his own brother would eventually prove the undoing of this very brave and very dedicated and in some ways very noble (but in other ways completely misguided) man who in following the only lights that he knew and in following what he saw to be the best in his own tradition created a political climate in which his overthrow was a foregone conclusion, and those who opposed the rise of the Communist Party considered almost a necessary development if there was to be any chance of defeating this mounting insurgency.

In 1963 those forces which Diem himself had created and set in motion against him burst through the surface and he was overthrown. What happened in the period from 1963 to 1965 appeared to many of us in Western eyes as a succession of total political chaos and confusion, where you had coup d'etat after coup d'etat, a process which finally did not end until May of 1965, when substantially the present government came into power.

Let me invite you to consider for a minute some of the points we have just been talking about and discussing together. What really happened was not so much that you had a series of revolving door governments or a series of coups; but what really happened was that you were getting on the non-Communist side a

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striking of force balances, a hammering out of programs, a hammering out of differences that within the West would be done within a parliamentary or some form of institutional forum--the only problem being that in Vietnam there was no institutional forum; there was no way of finding out who had the most muscle until the mobs and tanks were turned out on the streets; there was no way of taking a vote; there was no accepted set of umpires, like a court structure, to which these disputes could be taken for settlement in peaceable terms. So the kind of political jockeying (this is perhaps not the most apt metaphor, but it will shed some light on the point I am trying to make) that takes place within a parliamentary assembly at the time the assembly is convened, the kind of arrangement for organizing the senates their allocation of committees had to take place in a different context, in a different form, in Vietnam before you could really see where the actual lines of political force lay, how strong the Buddhists really were, how strong the Catholics really were, and how strong which component of the army really was. It was this shakeout and adjustment process that occupied the period from November 1963 to May 1965.

While this was going on, there is a second point that has to be borne very clearly in mind. This adjustment process was being waged by as in fact the struggle against Diem had been waged by, and as a matter of fact the overthrow of Diem had been executed by, persons almost entirely on the non-Communist side of the spectrum. The Communists tried to get into this process and were

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generally rebuffed by all participants including even in those days the bulk of the Buddhists and even those who subsequently became the more militant Buddhists; because the one point on which all of the people who were taking part in this process were agreed upon (in fact, the only point they were agreed upon) was that they wanted no part of Communist direction and that they wanted no part of Communist rule and they wanted no part of making any common cause for this Communist-controlled insurgent apparatus. However, as I said, that was the only point on which they agreed. Hence, their interaction within themselves and within each other created an atmosphere of chaos and uncertainty which the Communists were quick to take advantage of.

The advantage that they took was making the calculated decision in the spring of 1964--making two calculated decisions. Decision one was that this period of chaos and uncertainty in the shakeout provided them with a golden opportunity. Decision two was the realization that once this period of shakeout ended, circumstances were liable to move in a direction very adverse to Communist interests because if you ever did get a government that was responsive to local political circumstances and responsive to local political needs, you might then get renewed progress on the evolution of a viable southern state, which was the one thing that the Party could not tolerate.

So the calculated decision was made in the late spring of 1964 to try to topple or collapse the situation before it

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changed in a manner adverse to Communist interests and while it was still fluid and while there was still the opportunity to capitalize on political and institutional disarray among the non-Communist side. The decision was made to inject those line elements of the North Vietnamese Army that would be required to tip the balance irrevocably in Communist favor. Thus you began to get the movement initially of the 324th Division down through Laos and the 325th and the other Communist North Vietnamese units which began showing up in Vietnam early in 1965 and have come in increasing numbers since then.

It was during 1964 that this critical change was made in the pattern of infiltration from ethnic southerners going down to organize a southern movement, southern in personnel but controlled from the Politburo--the changes made from sending those to sending those line elements of the North Vietnamese Army in who were necessary to tip the situation irrevocably in Communist favor. You got as a result of the injection of these line elements of the North Vietnamese Army a very parlous situation developing in the spring and early summer of 1965, where defeat was very really and very genuinely staring the whole southern apparatus of the whole non-Communist structure in the face.

Let me digress 30 seconds to point out a sort of historical sequence of events that is important. You will hear it argued that it was not the North Vietnamese who escalated the struggle but the injection of the North Vietnamese Army was a reaction to our input

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of U. S. troops and above all to our bombing of North Vietnam.

There are many points, gentlemen, about Vietnam over which honorable men and well informed men can legitimately and do legitimately differ, but this particular allegation does not happen to be one of them because the infusion of line elements of the North Vietnamese Army began to be notable in the latter part of 1964 as a result of a decision that must have been taken no later than the late spring of 1964 if one regards the lead time required for implementing such decisions in that context. And this was well before any U. S.

TO&E troops went into Vietnam, because even the Marines did not go into the Da Nang airfield until early 1965 and this was certainly well before any opening up of aerial bombardment in the sustained fashion on North Vietnam. So the notion that the North Vietnamese involvement is in response to our escalation may read very well on the front page of the New York Times but happens to have no basis in historical fact.

This force infusion that was made almost succeeded in its purpose, which was collapsing the non-Communist political structure in a way which would make it possible for the swift acquisition of Communist political control. The only thing that saved it was the rapid infusion of U. S. troops in the summer of 1965 and in early 1966. The issue was extremely critical for a period of time, as all of you who were involved in such affairs or in Vietnam at the time well know. The issue was saved, however; the troops did get there in time; and you saw in 1965 and 1966 a rather drastic

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turnaround of the situation--a turnaround in two directions. You saw a loss on the Communist side of the strategic initiative which they had heretofore enjoyed, and you saw a string of tactical defeats during 1965 and 1966 which shattered the aura of invincibility which had heretofore been one of the Communists' prime political advantages. You also saw another kind of turnaround which was less obvious but much more profound in the longer term because you had within the shield of temporary military security a continuation of this evolution toward a viable southern state structure that had been temporarily interrupted in 1963, if you want to date it from the downfall of the Diem regime, or 1957 if you want to go back to the point where Diem's political programs began to be really counterproductive.

Despite all of the alarms and excursions, you had from 1965 up to the fall of 1967 a really remarkable set of national, political, institutional evolutions which culminated in the existence of a bicameral legislature and a president and a vice president who were elected in terms of a constitution which in itself had been drafted by an elected assembly. In both of these elections, though far from perfect or ideal in terms that the ACLU would understand, both of them constituted an electoral process in which over half of the entire adult population of Vietnam had taken part. And you began to get, then, the genuine steps toward at least the kind of institutional framework structure which had never existed before and which was absolutely necessary if there was to

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be built a viable southern state. But remember that in the fall of 1967 it had only the framework and the structure. It had no traditional sanction; it had no historical sanction; it had no emotional sanction from the bulk of the population because it had not yet proved itself in the crucible of events as being something which was capable of acting in a manner with which the bulk of the population could identify.

You also had during 1966-67 serious address made to the basic problems of rural areas in the so-called "pacification" or "revolutionary development" program which again cut into the recruiting base the Communists had heretofore enjoyed and changed some of the local context in situations and problems from which the Communists had heretofore battered and out of which they had heretofore made political profit. So you had, thus, a reversal of field and a new environment and the resumption of steps toward the kind of political evolution that the Party simply could not allow or tolerate if it were to achieve its goal of acquiring political domination over the country.

From the spring of 1967 on the picture gets much more murky. What I am about to suggest is a theoretically possible sequence of events. Some of it can be proven and some is a personal hypothesis, with which I do not ask you necessarily agree and to which I would not want to commit all of my colleagues in the Government and not even all my colleagues within the Agency. My own belief is that the decision was taken, or, rather, that a

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review of the bidding must have been made (and we have some inferential evidence, such as the recall of ambassadors, a couple of documents, and one or two other signs), that there was a policy review made in Hanoi sometime during last summer, probably in July, possibly in late June, possibly in early August (but right during that spell). My own belief is that what was decided during that review of events was that the overall trend in South Vietnam was beginning to move politically, culturally, and militarily in a direction from the mentally adverse to Communist interests. I do not think the decision was made that the Party was weak or on the ropes or suffering the kind of attrition which was going to make it throw in the towel, but I do think the recognition was made that the strategy heretofore of grinding down and of preventing the evolution of a political or military structure in the south on the non-Communist side was simply not going to pay off because you had set in motion long-term trends that were working in the other direction and which if not reversed could change the political and cultural climate in a fashion in which the Communist revolution would be doomed to failure. Thus, I think, the decision was made to take a very high risk policy to try to reverse this trend, to try to prevent this institutional structure from beginning to gain some sort of sanction and loyalty and to alter the course of events before it was too late to do so by going off the very low or no-risk policy of indefinitely protracted war and taking the relatively high-risk policy of a major commitment of assets designed to reverse these political trends in a relatively short time frame.

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I believe this was the doctrinal thinking that lay behind the pattern of action that we have seen since then which has become known as the winter-spring offensive, whose most dramatic moments were the series of attacks throughout the country right around and during the Tet period, which has just passed.

It seems to me that the other, the basic, overriding strategic decision that was made at that time (and this is something that is not new because this has been the doctrine of the Party all along) was that the way to go about achieving what needed to be achieved was to get access to and to disturb the thoughts and emotions and shake the loyalties of the population of South Vietnam. In other words, the target of this people's war was to be the people and the way you were going to do that was to disperse allied (principally U. S.) forces away from populated areas so that you could go in and work among, disrupt your principal target, which was, of course, the population.

It seems to me if you take these working hypotheses (as I said, they cannot be proved beyond reasonable doubt, but square with all the evidence of which I am aware as being available), the sequence of events that have followed falls into rather neat, logical places.

The initial moves of this offensive were the engagements around Dak To, Loc Ninh, and elsewhere in the western part of the country during last fall. These were construed on our side at the time as being tactical successes; in a sense they were tactical

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successes. We denied the enemy terrain, and we inflicted losses upon him which were entirely disproportionate to our own casualties. However, I am not so sure that in Communist eyes they were strategic failures, because in retrospect it certainly appears that not the least of the function of these engagements was to take U. S. troops away from the immediate vicinity of Saigon and the other central area towns and draw them out to the western part of the country, away from where the people were, away from the area where they were directly protecting the target to which the Communists wanted most immediate access.

You saw, then, the posture and the nibbles on negotiations which have come around the world, the strident insistence that the Communists wanted a seven-day Tet truce, that we were really wicked for wanting only a three-day Tet truce, and all of the very careful, detailed, logistical planning and personnel planning that we now know went into the preparation of the assault on the cities, launched the night of Tet itself.

The assault was launched, as you know. The Communists failed in their initial objective of obtaining and holding control of any single city. They were eventually driven out of even Hue. They rather drastically and seriously failed in their attempts to generate any kind of popular rallying or rising which their own documents and their own prisoners suggest they estimated. If this is the case, they made a very serious misestimate of the situation and the mood and temper of the Vietnamese people. In the process

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they also took very severe casualties. All of these, of course, are very definite plusses and grounds for encouragement as far as we are concerned.

I would like to invite you to remember and to ponder and realize that this move against the cities was but a dramatic step in a much longer-range total campaign which began in its action phase last September and which is designed to play against those very cultural qualities and those very political weaknesses in the whole Vietnamese structure that we have been outlining and talking about earlier in this lecture, because although the initial move against the cities was checked and coped with, the battle or the struggle is far from over. The Communist intent now is to remain in the immediate proximity of the major urban population centers to the extent they can to bottle the GVN's military unit up in these major urban centers so that the countryside is by and large free for the activities of the Communist recruiters and Communist agitators and Communist organizers, and at the same time, by posing threats at Khe Sanh, at Dak To, along the B-3 front, and elsewhere, to force a dispersion of U. S. troops so that we cannot go into either the delta or the countryside area, or, hopefully and ideally from a maximum Communist position, come to the relief of cities which are subjected to further pressure, harassment and attack.

Just how the events of the future will unfold within the next few weeks is something that no one can say with assurance

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because a great deal depends upon what our adversaries try to do; a great deal depends upon what we decide to do; a great deal--in fact, perhaps most things--depends on how our Vietnamese allies behave in this period of stress and strain. The only safe prediction I think anyone can make is, whatever else happens, we are not going to go back to the status quo ante of 28 January and that out of this current pressure of events, one side (the GVN or the VC) is going to emerge in a much better relative position vis-a-vis its adversaries than it was when it went into it.

The point I would like to direct your attention to here is that the main focus and thrust of the current attack, the thing against which it is directed, is that very institutional fabric and structure that were painfully evolved from 1965 to the present and which were very frail and tender flowers because they were growing in culturally alien soil and had no sanction of history or tradition behind them, and in trying to work against them the Communists are trying to burr like an abrasive drill against the ability of this government structure in its civil side to function and the ability of its military components to function, and above all, they are trying to burr against the attitude, thoughts, or beliefs or confidence of the bulk of the Vietnamese people in their own government's ability to protect them or to provide them with minimum social services. In doing this they are going to take full exploitative advantage of the localism and particularism of the Vietnamese people, of their lack of institutional loyalty,

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of their concern for their own immediate families and their own immediate welfare and all of these other cultural and attitudinal ideas that we have touched on during the course of this lecture.

I did not mean to leave you with a picture of unrelieved gloom and depression. I do want to emphasize that I am not saying which way this is necessarily going to come out because if the GVN is able, with our assistance and help, to capitalize on their initial success in frustrating our adversaries' intent and to go out and work against the now exposed Communist structure and throw back into the Party's face the exaggerated claims of political achievement that were made in the early days of the Tet offensive and harness popular irritation at this desecration of the most sacred of all Vietnamese holidays, a very great deal can be achieved politically on our side. But in picking the steps that will have to be taken and in moving the way that we will have to move, and in analyzing the things that will have to be done, you must remember the kind of matrix we have, the kind of political situation we have, the kind of culture we have, all of which condition the problems we face and the answers we will have to provide to meet them within our own national interests.

Thank you very much indeed.

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